

Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 1, 2008

Readings:

Acts of the Apostles 9:26-31

1st Letter of John 3:18-24

John 15:1-8

The Gospel takes us to one of the most celebrated sections of the discourse of the fourth Gospel., the extended image of Christ as the “true vine” continues the theme of divine indwelling that we have already had in the second reading. It has an Old Testament background in the sense of Israel as the “vine” God brought out of Egypt and “cultivated” in a new land: “You brought out a vine of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land.”

Now the People of God is being changed with Christ as the “true vine”, with the disciples forming the branches that are to bear its “fruit”. Just as God “cultivated” the vine that was Israel so Jesus pictures the Father as the “vine grower”.

The passage gives two descriptions, one after the other, of what is essentially the same pattern of vine dressing activity on the part of God: branches bearing no fruit are cut away and branches bearing fruit are “pruned” so that the next season they may bear even more fruit. What makes a branch yield fruit is the strength of its union with the vine hence the need for believers to maintain the closest possible union with Christ. The fruit that they will bear will be specifically the acts of love that are the extension in their own lives of the love they have received from Christ. Some hearers will probably focus on the detail about the withered branches being collected and thrown in the fire and interpret it as a reference to Hell. It is not necessary to take the allegory so far in this direction; better to stay within the image, which simply wants to affirm the uselessness of such branches and the necessity of remaining united with Christ. Believers will be truly his disciples

when their lives manifest the love displayed in his. This will be to the “glory” of the Father in the sense of revealing to the world that God is love.

The focus of God’s loving action, trying to bring out the best in us, is reflected in our first reading. The reading from Acts takes us to the immediate aftermath of the conversion of Paul. So fearsome has been his reputation as a persecutor of the Church that it takes a long process of introduction from Barnabas before his vigor and enthusiasm, previously shown as a great persecutor, can now be part of the mission of the Church. Acts makes a great deal of the conversion of Paul (providing three accounts of it) and really tells the story of the early Church around him. He is so much an example of the power of God’s grace to turn a person’s life completely around, so that a formerly hostile figure becomes a great instrument in spreading the Gospel to the world. But it took a long time for the Church to cope with Paul. Eventually, they came to see, to believe and to trust, that God’s care could bring someone’s life completely around. The image of God as the vine dresser and the example of Paul show us what God can do. No one is beyond redemption, and all people have the chance, by choosing to remain close to God, to bear fruit and to build the kingdom of the Lord.